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# 11 When a Man Loves a Woman: Gender and National Identity in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Mariama Bâ's *Scarlet Song*

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> The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place.
>
> Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*

Literature as we know it today is a gendered practice. This is not because gendered lives are its referents: the study of those real lives is primarily the work of historians, sociologists, and anthropologists. Rather it is through the workings of the material worlds of publishing, teaching, and criticism, through narrative processes of selection and omission and strategies of representation, that literature is gendered. These processes and strategies will be our focus here: Readers, teachers, and critics who are conscious of the logic of gender are able to foreground both critical aspects of texts that typically are overlooked and the conditions that push certain texts into the limelight while obscuring others.

This does not mean that gender is *the* most powerful explanatory category of analysis nor a category that is complete unto itself. In fact, gender's high visibility as an analytical tool and the mostly celebratory readings of African women's writing in recent African literary scholarship may have obscured other discreet, if not unrelated, factors of stratification, such as class or access to education, that have equal relevance for understanding the lives of women and men that are drawn in texts we read. Whatever their specific arguments or the debates they have generated, the work of Ifi Amadiume (1987) on "traditional" Igbo gender roles and that of Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997) on the absence of gender categories in the Yorùbá language serve as reminders of the importance of taking into account the multiple factors at play in identity.

No mode of analysis, and certainly not *gender*, exists in a vacuum. If there is a debate on the epistemological merit of gender as a category within African studies, is it not precisely because the preoccupation with gender is felt to come from "somewhere" and that somewhere might not be Africa? Thus the question "Whose African studies?" is also germane. If one refers to the study of Africa practiced within *American* institutions of higher learning, then this location, as they all do, comes with baggage—the initial post-Sputnik tensions and rivalry (which is to say U.S. foreign policy concerns) that gave rise to African studies programs in the 1960s; the centrality of Title VI funding, which structures such programs around outreach and language training and has tended to privilege the social sciences; and the divergent trajectories, the often separate and typically unequal resources, the frequently tense relations between African studies and African-American (or Afro-American) studies.

In fact, "African studies," some have argued, is inherently and uniquely a U.S. formulation, in which Africa—like Latin America and Asia and perhaps even more than them—is appended to discipline-based university curricula and suffers from marginality and second-class citizenship. I am alluding to arguments set forth in *Africa Today* (1997) over the decline of the area studies model in the United States and the debate at the University of Cape Town in the late 1990s over the relevance of "African studies" as a way of conceptualizing and packaging the study of Africa.

Is the theme "Africa after gender?" about the aptness and merits of attention paid to gender in the study of Africa *within universities in the United States*, where a prevailing feminist consciousness may obscure North American women's own collusion with global processes and other forms of oppression that affect African women adversely? Or is it about gender and the study of Africa more generally *outside* Africa, since "African studies," as the marginal unit described above, presumably does not exist in Africa? Or is it rather about the study of Africa *everywhere*, including Africa first and foremost? There is strong evidence that gender has become an important category of analysis on the continent. Since 1994, for example, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) has sponsored an institute on gender each summer with the participation of twelve to fifteen researchers from around the continent and in every field.[1] On a personal level, I witnessed the interest and demands of students at the University of Yaoundé in fall semester 1998: whether because it was fashionable to do so or because it resonated with their own lives, students clamored for readings and coursework on feminism and gender.

Whatever its origins, whatever the systems of categorization and hierarchy of which it is a part, whatever the care with which it must therefore be handled, gender as a mode of analysis is felt to be important by many African scholars, students, and activists on the ground. It is here to stay. My question, then, is this: How specifically does gender shape literature and our understanding of literary processes?

Among the perspectives on literary practice offered by a consideration of gender, there are two that I find compelling and to which I return time and again in my own readings of African texts. The first is offered by Florence Stratton (1994), the second by R. Radhakrishnan (1992), whose case study is India but whose argument I find to be relevant to African literatures. Stratton shows that "African literature" at its inception in the world of publishing and the academy is a field constituted on the basis of gender bias. In particular, she makes clear the ways in which critical reception and scholarship have worked to marginalize African women writers and valorize male writers and male preoccupations or formulations. From the standard tripartite periodization of African literature—the age of anticolonial struggle, the age of independence, and the age of neocolonialism—to Fredric Jameson's (1986) claim of the predilection in "third world" literature for "national allegory" to Abdul JanMohamed's (1983) privileging of "race" as the constitutive category of African literature, Stratton demonstrates that gender differences are entrenched and ignored. For even as women wrote against colonial domination, they—unlike men, on the basis of whose works these parameters came to be seen as doctrine—set about critiquing differences *internal* to African nations. In the standard chronology, this self-critique is a characteristic of what is normally taken to be the last phase, the age of neocolonialism. The standard definition and periodization resulted in skewed criticism by the male establishment of the works of women writers, which led Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo to complain that she and other women writers had been deprived of vital critical commentary on their work.[2]

Stratton demonstrates likewise that the "mother Africa" trope operates to present women as what she calls "the pot of culture" and that male writers, who are often viewed as progressive, call them into service as prostitutes to condemn the degradation of contemporary Africa associated with the "sweep of history." While I might quarrel with her denunciation of particular texts and writers or specific interpretations, the overall vision is an important and useful one.

R. Radhakrishnan (1992) expands on the first avatar of this trope in an article that seeks to understand the exclusion of "the woman question" from the nationalist debate and agenda at the moment of decolonization in India or its relegation to a second order of importance. Building on the work of Partha Chatterjee (1993) and Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1990), Radhakrishnan begins with the important observation that in the context of third world nationalisms, the nation is seen as foreign:

> Western nationalisms are deemed capable of generating their own models of autonomy from within, whereas Eastern nationalisms have to assimilate something alien to their own cultures before they can become modern nations. Thus in the Western context, the ideals of Frenchness, Germanness, or Englishness—national essences rooted in a sense of autochthony—become the basis of a modernity that re-roots and reconfirms a native sense of identity. On the other hand, Eastern nationalisms, and in particular "Third World" nationalisms, are forced to choose between "being themselves" and "becoming modern nations" as though the universal standards of reason and progress were natural and intrinsic to the West. In this latter case, the universalizing mission is embued with violence, coercion, deracination and denaturalization. We can see how this divide perpetrates the ideology of a

> dominant common world where the West leads naturally and the East follows in an eternal game of catch-up where its identity is always in dissonance with itself. (1992, 86)

The choice between "becoming modern nations" and "being ourselves" can be seen as a form of politicocultural schizophrenia. In this tug of war, women become, in Christine Obbo's words, "the mediators between the past and the present, while men see themselves as mediators between the present and the future" (Stratton 1994, 8). Women are the symbolic markers of "true identity." Radhakrishnan explains this phenomenon in detail:

> By mobilizing the inner/outer distinction against the "outerness" of the West, nationalist rhetoric makes "woman" the pure and ahistorical signifier of "interiority" . . . the mute but necessary allegorical ground for the transactions of nationalist history. . . . Nationalism could neither ignore the West completely nor capitulate to it entirely: the West and its ideals of material progress had to be assimilated selectively, without any fundamental damage to the native and "inner" Indian self. In other words, questions of change and progress posed in Western attire were conceived as an outer and epiphenomenal aspect of Indian identity, whereas the inner and inviolable sanctum of Indian identity had to do with home, spirituality, and the figure of Woman as representative of the true self. (1992, 84)

In texts written under the sign of nationalism, then, if one follows the scholars I have cited, women are inscribed as correlatives of the "inner sanctum"—home, tradition, and thus the wholesomeness of the body politic. These scholars do not address the roles of men in comparable detail, but I assume that within this model the forms of progress associated with "outerness" (the West)—such as the state and public space—lie in the province of men. Given these assumptions, I shall offer a gender-sensitive reading of two texts frequently taught in undergraduate literature courses in the United States, Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) and Mariama Bâ's *Scarlet Song* (*Un chant écarlate*, 1981). Both involve a man's marriage to an additional wife; in Soyinka's text, the new wife is young enough to be his daughter. Men in these texts regard such marriages, implicitly or explicitly, as emblems for "African tradition." While *Death and the King's Horseman* deploys this marriage to defend African essence and honor, *Scarlet Song* treats this perspective with irony. Soyinka's text is an act of archeological and utopic recovery, whereas Bâ offers a stringent critique of patriarchal privilege in the present.

While the works of Bâ and Soyinka are different in genre, language, and national context, concepts of gender are critical to and circulate through them. *Scarlet Song* is a French-language novel by a Senegalese woman; *Death and the King's Horseman* is an English-language play by a Nigerian man. In the latter, traditional Yoruba rituals, myths, and social practices are central to the theatrical language. By contrast, Bâ's ethnic origins—Bâ is a Fulbe name—are rarely mentioned in discussions of her work: Her choice of form, the dilemmas she constructs, her strategies of representation are not particularly conditioned by ethnicity. What the two works share is a preoccupation with woman as signifier



of the past and, consequently, as anchor in a turbulent present. Thus, Soyinka relies on gender constructs to defend Yorùbá civilization in the face of Western colonialism. Bâ demonstrates that such constructs are incompatible with a truly progressive society or at least with middle-class women's welfare.

*Death and the King's Horseman* is an acclaimed, now canonical, play, the object of significant critical commentary and debate. The play is composed of five acts. In the first, Elesin Oba, the King's Horseman, is accompanied by his praise-singer to the marketplace, where the market women are closing their stalls for the day: "This market is my roost. When I come among the women I am a chicken with a hundred mothers. I become a monarch whose palace is built with tenderness and beauty" (1975, I:10). It is here that Elesin intends to die so as to follow the immemorial tradition of accompanying the King, who has recently died, to the other side.[3] Elesin and the praise-singer banter through rich, dense metaphor and parables about Elesin's exuberance and great love of life, his privilege as the King's Horseman, the human fear of death, the importance of the ritual to come, and Elesin's determination to follow through as a man of honor. After his prodding, Iyaloja, the mother of the market, consents to marry off her intended daughter-in-law to Elesin as a sign of the market women's love and admiration for him and warns him, much to his displeasure, that failure to follow through on the ritual once the marriage is consummated would be disastrous for the community and Elesin's legacy.

In contrast to the brilliantly lyrical Act I, Act II is prosaic and comic, as the action switches to the residence of the British administrator Simon Pilkings and his wife Jane. The couple are preparing for a masquerade ball that will feature a surprise visit by the British prince, and for the occasion they have donned ritual clothing confiscated from the Yorùbá. Their Christian servant Joseph and Muslim subaltern officer Amusa are intimidated and disapproving. Worried by distant drums whose message—Is it death? Is it a marriage?—cannot be determined, Pilkings and Jane nonetheless set off for the ball and send Amusa to forestall any trouble.

Amusa and his men arrive at the market in Act III and are not allowed by the market women to arrest Elesin, who will shortly "commit death" but who is still in the bridal chamber. The women's daughters parody British settlers in an uproarious manner and draw Amusa into their performance. As the errand boy of the British, he is belittled and labeled a nonman ("he has no weapon") in comparison to Elesin. Act III closes in semi-darkness, as Elesin, under the spell of the drum and poetic chant of the praise singer, is in the passage to death.

Act IV finds Pilkings and Jane at the ball, where they learn that Elesin has been captured. Olunde, Elesin's son, appears, having returned from England, where he had gone to obtain training as a doctor. When he learned that the King had died, he booked passage back to Nigeria to bury his father who he knew would accompany the King in death. Olunde confronts Jane and they clash over the meaning of "civilization" and "primitivism." The captured Elesin is dragged on stage and grovels before his son.

In Act V, a shamed and contemplative Elesin, his young bride at his side,

speaks from his jail cell with Pilkings, who is satisfied to have prevented a primitive ritual and avoided embarrassment during the Prince's visit. Iyaloja appears, rebuking Elesin and delivering a mysterious bundle. His father having failed to die, Olunde has desperately and perhaps ineffectively followed through on the immemorial cultural ritual in his father's stead. When Elesin realizes that before him lies the body of his son, he strangles himself.

Soyinka tells us in his "Author's Note" that *Death and the King's Horseman* is based on an incident that took place in Nigeria in 1946 but that for purposes of dramaturgy he has taken a number of liberties, among them, changing the date of the action to the early 1940s, during World War II. This enables both the wartime visit of the British prince to the colony—escalating the stakes for Pilkings—and comparisons in Act IV between a British ship captain's self-sacrifice in wartime and ritual suicide among the Yorùbá.

The representation of woman and man in *Death and the King's Horseman* is thus subsumed under a "larger" project of defending an African civilization that is none other than a form of nationalism. In this sense the play demonstrates that nationalism is a gendered construct and that women are the stable ground upon which—if we take Soyinka to be exemplary—masculine nationalism is built. What is of particular interest here is, first, the trio of Iyaloja, the daughters of the market women, and the young virginal Bride whom Elesin takes shortly before he will die, and, second, the Elesin-Amusa pair. There are important contradictions in these groupings that suggest the instability of gendered nationalism and foretell its crises.

Significantly, as Radhakrishnan's model of the politicocultural division of spheres in anticolonial or postcolonial societies predicts, the play sends Olunde off to England, the outside world of apparent modernity and progress, to obtain medical training, a by-product of colonialism. And it places local traditions under the sign of the feminine. Elesin Oba's death, which will assure continuity between the worlds of the living, the dead, and the unborn and will therefore keep the Yorùbá world "on its course," is prepared by and is to take place among the market women, of whom Iyaloja is the leader. Iyaloja represents the considerable social and commercial stature of women within patriarchy before and even during European intervention in West Africa. She makes the decision to grant Elesin, the community's revered ambassador to the land of the ancestors, his final wish and dictates the terms of that gift. Except for the praise-singer, the Yorùbá community is represented in the play entirely by women.

The daughters of the market women who are attending British or missionary schools and the Bride represent the next generation, but there is a deep split between their socially critical positions. The spiritual, traditional, indigenous sphere is emphatically embodied in the person of the young bride, the "gift of the living to their emissary to the land of the ancestors," the "earth" into which Elesin will sow seed, the "abyss" across which his body will be drawn. The Bride has no name and never speaks. She thus stands outside of time and represents the pure and unchanging Tradition of which Iyaloja and the girls are vociferous defenders. The Bride is modest and self-effacing and assumes postures of submission and obedience at every moment. Elesin calls her "little mother." In the final act she weeps, Elesin observes, and her only gesture comes at the very end of the play when, under the authority of Iyaloja, she closes Elesin's eyelids and pours earth over each of them.



The static role of the Bride is in textual tension with the dynamic role of the other girls, presumably her age, who attend school. An important implication is that whatever British protocols, "rational" arguments, or technological feats they have mastered at school, the indigenous cultural and metaphysical moorings of the daughters of the market women, like those of Olunde, remain unshaken.[4] There is no incommensurability, the play suggests, between local beliefs or rituals and world knowledges: "foreign" technology and knowledge can be assimilated and indigenized without damage to cultural identity. Thus, not only do the schoolgirls mock the British colonizers, they also ridicule the colonial lackeys, Amusa and his men, who appear to have lost their cultural identity.

But the play offers no explanation as to why the young bride should represent the past and be unable to speak of it. She gives no signs of the dexterity of movement and thought implicit in the girls' parody of British colonial civility. This is all the more striking because two of the market women express pride in their daughters' accomplishments. Their decision to send their daughters (Apinke and Wuraola) to school is justified by the girls' theatrical triumph:

> *(The women strike their palms across in the gesture of wonder.)*
> **WOMEN:** Do they teach you all that at school?
> **WOMAN:** And to think I nearly kept Apinke away from the place.
> **WOMAN:** Did you hear them? Did you see how they mimicked the white man?
> **WOMAN:** The voices exactly. Hey, there are wonders in this world!
> **IYALOJA:** Well, our elders have said it: Dada may be weak, but he has a younger sibling who is truly fearless.
> **WOMAN:** The next time the white man shows his face in this market I will set Wuraola on his tail. (40)

The girls are firmly anchored in history, while the Bride is systematically referred to as the earth into which Elesin will sow his seed and is associated with earth in the final act. There are two ironies here. First, the girls, like Olunde, are articulate and effective defenders of Tradition precisely because they are no longer pure embodiments of those traditions themselves. Thanks to their colonial education, they will one day challenge colonial arrogance on its own terms and *be heard* ("Fearless Wuraola will be on the white man's tail"). In fact, Olunde and the schoolgirls are hybrids, as is the ridiculed Amusa, who can be seen as more faithful to Yorùbá traditions in some respects than is Olunde (George 1999, 67–91). The second irony is that in their fierce defense of tradition for tradition's sake, the schoolgirls are able to consign a girl like themselves to a silence and a role that seem to be terribly at odds with their own lives. The girls put African nationalism first, while they relegate "the woman question" to the back burner. Is this the playwright's nationalist wishful thinking? Or

prescience? Does this invisibility of some women to others signal a troubled stratification to come? Is the Bride the subaltern for whom postcolonial women intellectuals will speak?

The conflation of masculinity and nationalist resistance is similarly exposed in a comparison of Elesin and Amusa. From the opening lines of the play, Elesin is cast as a man with an appetite for all of life's pleasures. In an extended series of metaphors, the praise-singer proclaims Elesin's prowess as hunter, warrior, and lover:

> PRAISE-SINGER: Who would deny your reputation, snake-on-the-loose in dark passages of the market! Bed-bug who wages war on the mat and receives the thanks of the vanquished! When caught with his bride's own sister he protested—but I was only prostrating myself to her as becomes a grateful in-law. Hunter who carries his powder-horn on the hips and fires crouching or standing! Warrior who never makes that excuse of the whining coward—but how can I go to battle without my trousers?—trouserless or shirtless it's all one to him. Oka-rearing-from-a-camouflage-of-leaves, before he strikes the victim is already prone! Once they told him, Howu, a stallion does not feed on the grass beneath him: he replied, true, but surely he can roll on it! (I:19)

It comes as no surprise, then, that Elesin desires the beautiful young woman he sees in the market, although it is construed as a spiritual union that will complement and bring to fulfillment his passage to the world beyond. Given his role and the community's reverence for him, it likewise makes sense that Iyaloja should agree to his marriage to the girl who was to become her son's wife. In Act 3, when Amusa comes to arrest Elesin for the suicide he is to commit, Iyaloja, voicing an anticolonial critique, conflates Elesin's death on behalf of the community with the consummation of the marriage:

> **IYALOJA:** What gives you the right to obstruct our leader of men in the performance of his duty.
> **AMUSA:** What kin' duty be dat one Iyaloja.
> **IYALOJA:** What kin' duty? What kin' duty does a man have to his new bride?
> **AMUSA** (bewildered, looks at the women and at the entrance to the hut): Iyaloja, is it wedding you call dis kin' ting?
> **IYALOJA:** You have wives haven't you? Whatever the white man has done to you he hasn't stopped you having wives. And if he has, at least he is married. If you don't know what a marriage is, go and ask him to tell you.
> **AMUSA:** This no to wedding.
> **IYALOJA:** You want to look inside the bridal chamber? You want to see for yourself how a man cuts the virgin knot? (III:36)

It is hard to imagine a more potent use of Woman as embodiment of tradition and, conversely, of masculinity *via heterosexual intercourse* as traditionalist, heroic, nationalist. For this is not simply a double entendre or metaphor: the physical consummation of the marriage has become part of the ritual, blood-stained white cloth and all. In contrast, Iyaloja then suggests Amusa's lack of manliness, thereby extending the earlier taunts of the other market women: "white man's eunuch," "You mean there is nothing there at all," "you come to show power to women and you don't even have a weapon" (III:34–35). The great irony, of course, is that while in this scene Elesin does have a "weapon" and is fully a man in the community's terms, it is he nonetheless who will lose his status as a man of honor. Ultimately, the equating of sexual prowess in the bridal chamber to manliness and the defense of tradition—despite the case made for this reading by the play—can be seen to be a sham.

Soyinka insists in his foreword that the colonial factor is a mere "catalytic incident" and that this failure should be attributed solely to Elesin, who self-servingly chooses to read the colonial intervention as a sign that he might escape his destiny. But the spectator or reader is in her rights to ponder the significance not only of the colonial intervention in this failure, as Anthony Appiah (1992) and Olakunle George (1999) have argued, but also of the gendered construction itself, the conflation of anticolonial resistance and manliness.

Elesin, who undoubtedly sees Olunde's cultural "hybridity" as incompatible with manhood and has dismissed his son, finds himself admitting in response to Olunde's contempt for him: "I know now that I did give birth to a son" (V:63). But the play does not authorize a reading of Olunde as particularly manly. Olunde is rather consistently referred to as "the younger shoot" in contrast to Elesin, "the parent shoot." Even Iyaloja's final castigation of Elesin and honoring of Olunde rests as much on a rhetoric of age and maturity as one of masculinity: "There lies the honour of your household and of our race. Because he could not bear to let honour fly out of doors, he stopped it with his life. The son has proved the father Elesin, and there is nothing left in your mouth to gnash but infant gums" (V:75). This defense of "African culture and tradition" is shaken by the many contradictions surrounding its reliance on gender identities.

It is precisely against such gendered representation of national and cultural identity that Senegalese writer Mariama Bâ rebels. This is implicit in her first novel, *So Long a Letter* (*Une si longue lettre*, 1980) for which Bâ received the first annual Noma Award for the best work published in Africa (Harrell-Bond, 1980),[5] but it is powerfully articulated in her posthumous second novel, *Scarlet Song*, which has received less critical attention. *So Long a Letter* is a tract against polygyny, which Bâ presents as backward, distinctly unmodern and unprogressive. Ramatoulaye, the heroine, who has grown up in the era of colonialism, is enamored of books, writing, and the sense of possibility which they afford her, an African woman. In post-independence Senegal, Rama is a married woman, a mother of twelve, a schoolteacher. Her world is devastated when her husband of many years abandons her in taking a second wife, Binetou, a schoolgirl who has been manipulated by her status-seeking mother. Upon her husband's death, Rama writes a series of letters to her childhood friend Aïssatou, who lives in New York. Aïssa, a mother of four, has chosen divorce rather than accept the co-wife status imposed on her by her husband and mother-in-law, for whom

stratification by caste is paramount. The entire story is told through Rama's letters, which are more akin in fact to a diary or journal. Rama takes up her pen to examine her life, her relationship to her deceased husband, and her future.

Bâ's second novel, *Scarlet Song* (1986), is the story of two adolescent sweethearts, Mireille de La Vallée, daughter of a French diplomat assigned to Senegal, and Ousmane Guèye, the good-hearted son of a poor Muslim family in urban Dakar. Students at Cheikh Anta Diop University in the 1960s, they fall in love and keep their love secret from their families. When Mireille's father discovers his daughter's relationship, he whisks her back to France, where she finds herself in the midst of the tumult of May 1968. Mireille and Ousmane keep up their relationship through letters in which they affirm their commitment to each other and to progressive politics. His diploma in hand, Ousmane flies to France for a vacation, so his parents think, but he and Mireille are wed. The couple write to their respective parents to give them the news and create consternation on every side.

Upon their return to Senegal, Mireille strives to adapt to Senegalese family life, but the marriage is soon under strain; Ousmane's mother in particular rejects all of Mireille's efforts. Even the son born to them is dismissed by Yaye Khady as a café-au-lait mongrel. Ousmane loses interest in his son and wife, whose Western assumptions and values he now finds constraining and demeaning of his identity as a black African. He prefers the companionship of his male friends and shows solidarity with his mother against Mireille. Ouleymatou, a young woman with no future prospects of husband or work, sees an opening and makes the most of it. An old flame who had rejected Ousmane as something of a mother's boy when they were younger, she now pursues him on every front—working her way into Yaye Khady's good graces and seducing Ousmane with an arsenal of charms and cultural rituals. Unbeknown to Mireille and much to Yaye Khady's pleasure, Ousmane starts a second family and takes Ouleymatou as his second wife. Mireille's suspicions of Ousmane's infidelity are confirmed by his younger sister. Mireille goes mad, killing their son and leaving Ousmane to ponder unhappily the chaos he has created.[6]

Most commentators on *Scarlet Song* are unanimous: they read the novel as an accurate portrayal and assessment of the difficulties of interracial marriage in early post-independence West Africa. Class expectations and the specific gender configuration—the woman is white and the man black—are important compounding factors in the couple's demise, although in initial critical responses at least, these factors, especially gender, were signaled less often. But clearly the social burden, the competition menacing the foreign spouse, would not arise were the man white and the woman black. Ousmane's and Mireille's racial difference alone, then, is read as a metonymy for the impossibility of transcending culture or—in this text's terms—origins.

Commentators thus assume (or imply that Mariama Bâ assumes) the exclusive and imperative nature of cultural heritage and that, even if unfortunate, the influence of culture is "normal."[7] Clearly, Mireille and Ousmane *should* have heeded the call of origins, they *should not* have married outside their race and



class. One such commentator, whose publication in the popular press may help ground her particular assumptions, goes still further, seeing Ousmane's ultimate rejection of Mireille as justified: "Bâ . . . as an African . . . identifies with the forces that motivate Ousmane. After repudiating his background and culture to marry Mireille, he is expected to conform with her Western conception of marriage. . . . His decision to marry the woman he was in love with as an adolescent signifies his need to return to his roots" (Toupouzis 1998, 70–71).

The cracks in this argument are quite apparent, however, if one chooses to look. The argument can only be made if one accepts a number of omissions and contradictions. For example, the narrator of *Scarlet Song* states explicitly with respect to the supposed expectation that Ousmane conform to a Western conception of marriage that Mireille was willing to work at a mutually satisfactory marriage and insinuates that Ousmane chose not to: "Between the two extremes, it would have been easy for Ousmane to create . . . a home [with tolerance and respect for differences], since his wife, while retaining her own personality, did not attempt to make him her slave. But, when all was said and done, was Ousmane really interested in the peace and equilibrium of his household?" (Bâ 1986, 123).

Similarly, Ouleymatou cannot be called simply the woman Ousmane "was in love with as an adolescent." To do so is to ignore the crucial fact that Ousmane did not just stop loving Ouleymatou and then start loving her again, as one might be led to believe. It was Ouleymatou who rejected Ousmane, and she did so because he was too "feminine," too much his mother's helper. In fact, the narrator goes to great lengths to cast Ouleymatou as entirely self-interested. One can come to the conclusion that Bâ identifies with Ousmane's quest for returning to "his roots," for renewing a bond with essential Africa, only if one elides these dimensions of the story.

I cite these assorted interpretations because they exemplify a pervasive preoccupation on the part of readers with racial-cultural conflict and an assumption that cultural traditions, be they African or European, are imperative—a sort of call of the primal—and, in any event, socially enforced. But a careful reading of the text shows that Bâ's critique of polygyny is as unwavering in this second novel as it is in her first. Moreover, the novel is up to the still more important work of critiquing the conflation of masculinity, cultural nationalism (négritude), and the mystification of the black woman, as we see it in Léopold Senghor's "Femme noire" or Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. In *So Long a Letter*, the cultural signification of the "*black* woman" cannot be raised because all the women are black. Ironically, the racial difference of the couple in *Scarlet Song* mystifies Ousmane's abandonment of his wife and obscures the critique of polygyny, but Mireille's whiteness is absolutely crucial to the critique of the role of the black woman in forms of cultural nationalism such as négritude, for there is no such thing as "black woman" where there is no "white woman."

Mireille is in my reading but an avatar, a more intense version of Aïssa and Rama, those Senegalese black women who "keep clean houses," "like books,"

and, not coincidentally, want monogamous husbands. Being white, Mireille is simply "the extreme" of the type. It is helpful to think of Bâ's novels, then, as images on a "silk screen." In the first image/printing (which corresponds to *So Long a Letter*), the second wife's appeal is her pliability or docileness, a product of her "noble" education in the case of Aïssatou's rival, Nabou, or, in the case of Binetou, her inferior class status and quest for material improvement. For whatever motives, then, the second wife accepts the role of handmaiden to man. The narrator insists on the backward nature and atavistic behavior of these women or their mothers and contrasts these qualities with the enlightened and autonomous choices of the highly educated Aïssa and Rama in their presumably equal partnerships with Mawdo and Modou, respectively.[8]

In the second image/printing that is *Scarlet Song*, then, Bâ launches the same scathing attack on what the novel presents as the innate sexual greed of men and the material hunger of lower-class women (Ouleymatou and Yaye Khady) that helps fuel polygynist logic. Because Mireille is white, the limits of the cultural nationalist representation of the black woman become visible. In Ouleymatou, Ousmane experiences sexual comforts, in addition to or because of a shared past and culture: "Night after night passed. Incense rose in clouds. They feasted on highly spiced dishes, nostalgically reliving the kingdom of childhood. Mabo the Dialli plucked at the strings of his Khalam. The compound flourished at Ousmane's expense" (121). Ouleymatou, incense, traditional foods, and music: for Ousmane, loving Ouleymatou is a synesthetic experience of culture and history.

Frequently the narrator slips into a favored mode of narration, indirect free speech, to share Ousmane's intoxication:

> Ouleymatou had become his true soulmate, the woman in whom he recognized the extension of himself. She was, as Mabo Dialli so rightly sang, at one and the same time his roots, his stock, his growth, his flowering. They were linked by their childhood, spent in the maze of dusty streets. Most important, they were linked by their common origins: the same ancestors, the same skies. The same soil! The same traditions! Their souls were impregnated with the sap of the same customs. They were excited by the same causes. Neither Ousmane nor Ouleymatou could disclaim this common essence without distorting their very natures. Cultural heritage was taking its pitiless revenge. It was reclaiming its due and revealing to Ousmane the end-point of his flight. (121)

Because Mariama Bâ has a predilection for indirect free speech and uses it forcefully and systematically to convey interior thoughts and perspectives, it is easy to read the novel as approving of Ousmane's choice to "return to the source" via his love for Ouleymatou and to resist Western cultural domination. But there are significant passages in which the narrator attacks Ousmane's behavior in forthright terms. Ousmane's rapture, Ouleymatou's seduction are rarely narrated without mention of their material causes and effects. Thus, in the passage where Ousmane is under the spell of music, incense, and food, the narrator points out that the compound is aware of the illicit relationship—



Ouleymatou's father's first wife slips incense and aphrodisiac powders to Ouleymatou; her father is conveniently sunk in his world of prayers, unaware of the whispers around his daughter's behavior; and everyone is flourishing materially from their complicity. In this way, Ouleymatou's mystique is continually demystified by the narrator's references to "manna from heaven" and by the ostentatious waste triggered by this call of origins (125).

Moreover, the narrator's judgment of Ousmane's morality is absolute: "In Usine Niari Talli Ouleymatou was admired: a suitor's moral qualities carrying little weight in people's judgment, money alone being at the heart of their raptures over Ouleymatou, merchandise that had gone to the highest bidder!" (134–135). Ousmane's friend, Ali, is similarly revolted by Ousmane's abandonment of Mireille, his misuse of her property, and his "trying to find cultural justifications" (139) for a physical infatuation. Ali seethes with disappointment: "Ousmane Gueye, the uncompromising disciple of 'Negritude', who used to advise them to 'open up,' was now turning in on himself, with the excuse of not betraying 'his roots!'" (135).[9]

The narrator spells out the stakes, then, for the black man in a culturalist reading of the black female body:

> "Ouleymatou, the symbol of my double life!" Symbol of the black woman, whom he had to emancipate; symbol of Africa, one of whose "enlightened sons" he was.
>
> In his mind he confused Ouleymatou with Africa, "an African [*sic*] which has to be restored to its prerogatives, to be helped to evolve!" When he was with the African woman, he was the prophet of the "word made truth", the messiah with the unstinting hands, providing nourishment for body and soul. And these roles suited his deep involvement. . . . When those gentle black hands massaged his muscles with infinite tenderness, a deep affinity was established. It ate into his innermost being, shook him to the core, disturbed his very soul, and set him up as a "fighter," "an ambassador of his people". . . . (149–150)

In a clairvoyant glimpse of postcolonial theorizing to come, Mariama Bâ has drawn the portrait of feminine and masculine identities under decolonizing nationalism, located them in their respective private and public spaces, and signaled their distinct relationships to the past and the present/future.

But even as *Scarlet Song* critiques polygyny and the mystique of the black woman under cultural nationalism, it reveals a certain ambivalence: it indulges in this mystique and simultaneously views the sexuality of Ouleymatou and the women she represents with suspicion, if not hostility.

Both *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song* suppress the representation of middle-class women's sexuality—in correlation perhaps to their espousal of monogamy and the quest for female dignity. Sexual desire or behavior is absent in the portraiture of the enlightened, middle-class Rama and Aïssatou—whether an effect of caste or ethnic stereotyping or an expression of Islamic or colonial models of femininity.[10] Simultaneously, a menacing sexuality is explicitly assigned to the naive or lower-class antagonists who become second wives in *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*. Significantly, descriptions of Mireille are limited to the

mention early on in the novel of the young woman's *uncontrived* appeal: her "green eyes," "long hair," and "enchanting beauty." The white woman's "God-given" unbeguiling beauty is in counterpoint to *Scarlet Song*'s titillating scenes of Ouleymatou's toilette and her arsenal of seductive weaponry. The lower-class, uneducated, and man-hungry Ouleymatou works at seduction. Ironically, she is in this novel—as "black woman" is more generally for many a male writer—the occasion for lyrical expression. The following passage in which Ouleymatou prepares to seduce Ousmane for the first time is a veritable space of textual/sexual play (and possibly pastiche). Parting ways with the ponderous issues we associate with "Literature," this description would easily be at home in the romance novel of popular culture (and therefore blurs the distinction between "elite" and popular forms):

> She smeared a scented salve over her whole body till it shone and her oiled skin clothed her like a velvety film, which followed the swellings of her small firm breasts, curved over her hips to cover her firm, rounded buttocks.
>
> Clouds of incense rose up from a clay vessel and spiraled round her parted legs; she offered her whole body to its warm, fragrant caresses.
>
> She took strings of white beads from a box and draped them tinkling round her hips. She chose a pagne of light material, transparent enough to suggest her curves, while still remaining decent. She unfolded a new white bra that she had bought specially to emphasize her bust.
>
> She tied a little *gongo* powder in a piece of muslin and slipped the sweet-scented aphrodisiac between her breasts. . . .
>
> As she moved, a gauzy boubou allowed a glimpse, now of a plump shoulder, now of her breasts in their lacy prison, now the strings of beads, standing out round her hips. (108–109)

This voyeuristic passage is not unlike several in Pierre Loti's *Roman d'un spahi* (1870/1992), in which the native Senegalese girl Fatou-gaye seduces the *spahi* with her body, clothing, fragrance, and sexual savoir-faire. While such passages in Loti and other colonial writers draw on and extend racial and imperial discourse of the era with the effect of "othering" Africa, the effect of such passages in *Scarlet Song* is to "other" the lower-class or uneducated black woman on whom the novel foists sexuality and who in the current context represents a menace to middle-class family stability and the progressive nation.

The rift between the middle-class writing heroines and their antagonists can be understood in relationship to socioeconomic pressures and the lack of opportunities for women. This is one reason that Sembène's short novel (1973) and film (1974) *Xala*, which are intertexts for Bâ's novels, are helpful. They tie the representation of polygyny and gender roles to a portrait of neocolonialism, even though the film fails to portray the financial strain of the family of the new bride as it is depicted in the written text. Here, then, I take issue with Florence Stratton, who implies, if I read her correctly, that a male writer's (or filmmaker's) simultaneous portrayal of a woman prostitute (or, presumably, a second or third wife) *and* the multiple mechanisms of social anomie lead to an eclipse of women's specificity in favor of supposedly larger oppressions of global



politics or totalitarian political regimes. I would argue, on the contrary, that failure to represent the social dynamic within which women's oppression is realized may put women center stage but can be terribly misleading.

To the extent that *Death and the King's Horseman*, in its defense of Africa, deploys a certain mythology of masculine and feminine roles, perspectives on gender have allowed us to reveal the asymmetries of its vision. With regard to *Scarlet Song*, reading with attention to gender has allowed us to go beyond the conventional view of Bâ's novel as a reflection on the impediments to interracial marriage. The novel is itself gender-aware: Mariama Bâ points to the dangerous mystifications implicit in Soyinka's and all such readings of the African woman as bridge to the past or to cultural origins. But a consideration of the dynamics of class in *Scarlet Song* forces us to unpack the way that intellect and body, cosmopolitanism and backwardness (the lack of true "modern" ambition associated with formal or Western-style education) nonetheless inform Bâ's deployment of women. *Scarlet Song*'s revolt is incomplete. It pleads thematically for the importance of education and other fruits of modernity for all women, as does *So Long a Letter*, but it unwittingly projects a representational bias against lower-class and poor women. Bâ's gender-sensitive vision reveals the limits of négritude's space for Woman, but the lens of gender through which she writes is insufficient to clear a textual space for the poor or uneducated women whom it leaves in limbo. Ironically, both *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Scarlet Song* reveal the difficulty in imagining a truly progressive egalitarian society.

Gender analysis is one of several critical approaches that have challenged the notion of literature as pure, transcendent, and sacred. This matters because literary texts become our authorities on history, on the present, and on possibilities for the future. We need to see these texts as inquiries and experiments with all their contradictions: As long as social hierarchy informs and is normalized by creative processes, gender will remain a critical point of entry into complex social and aesthetic dynamics.

## Notes

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1. See http://www.codesria.org/Links/Training_and_Grants/Gender_institute.htm (accessed August 15, 2003).

2. Roundtable at Festival of African Writing, Brown University, November 1991.

3. Scholars have critiqued the ideological aspects of the play, the choice of this particular ritual from "class entrenched" ancient Oyo kingdom as the centerpiece of a defense of African civilizations, and the metaphysical vision of African unity that the play proposes (Jeyifo 1985). See also Appiah (1992, 73–84) and George (1999).

4. Tejumola Olaniyan has argued that for Soyinka, "The animist world-view is not inherently reactionary or anti-progress" (1992, 495). Soyinka himself writes that super-

stition, which includes "animism" and all the great religions, Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, Islam, and so forth, "has never yet prevented the rise to technological heights of any society" (1988, 74).

5. The Noma Award for publishing in Africa was created by the late Shoichi Noma, formerly president of Kodansha Ltd., the Japanese publishing house. Established in 1979, the award is open to African writers and scholars whose work is published in Africa. For more information, see http://www.nomaaward.org (accessed July 30, 2005).

6. There is little in their years of separation and tenacious commitment to suggest Ousmane's future change of heart and Mireille's fragility. Likewise, Ousmane's sister appears on the scene to deliver the fatal message of Ousmane's second marriage and then just as quickly and implausibly disappears. I read these textual discrepancies and excesses as signs of Bâ's will to contrive an impervious moral.

7. The editor of the novel, writing a tribute to Bâ that appears in the French text but is left out of the English version, draws a broad lesson about human nature: "Love does not always triumph over [the] prejudice and misunderstandings that are part of the cultural heritage that each of us carries as both wealth and burden" (my translation).

Mbye Cham (1987) sees the novel pragmatically as a cautionary tale about the dangers of ignoring the sway of race, class, and culture, while Aminata Maïga Kâ (1981) writes that all Bâ's heroines are punished for disobeying their parents and defying social norms.

For a reading that focuses on the couple's cultural differences but breaks with this pattern, see Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi (1997, 110–123). Susan Stringer also argues that Bâ's heroines are presented "as victims of their male partners rather than of their own lack of judgment" (1996, 62).

8. On the question of polygyny, modernity, and the nation, see Uzo Esonwanne (1997, 82–100).

9. Ali is recalling an oft-forgotten dimension of Senghorian négritude that is also rearticulated in the novel: the "return to the source" is complemented by cultural mixing and participation in the creation of a universal civilization. For Ali, Ousmane makes an excuse of the first to deny the second.

10. Ouleymatou's ethnic or caste status is never mentioned, but her sexualization by the narrator recalls the stereotyping of Laobé women performers by Wolof women (McNee 2000, 47–48).

With respect to Islam, Calloway and Creevey write that "husbands are obligated to provide food, clothing, shelter and sexual satisfaction (*defined as producing children*)" (1994, 36, my emphasis).

As for the colonial factor, there are interesting parallels in other contexts to the production of "enlightened" women in Bâ's novels. Kumari Jayawardena writes that the decolonized Asian bourgeois man, "himself a product of Western education or missionary influence, needed as his partner a 'new woman,' educated in the relevant foreign language, dressed in the new styles and attuned to Western ways. These women had to show that they were the negation of everything that was considered 'backwards' in the old society: that they were no longer secluded, veiled and illiterate with bound feet and minds, threatened with death on their husband's funeral pyre" (1986, 12–13). Ironically, in Bâ's Senegal, it is the men who collude—conveniently with lower-class women or to maintain caste privilege—to hold on to the atavistic practice of polygyny.

In the context of the United States, Hazel Carby (1999) argues that against the backdrop of twentieth-century racial politics and the legacy of slavery, black female sexuality was perceived by middle-class black women as degenerate. Carby cites Jane Edna Hunter's *A Nickel and a Prayer* (1940) to the effect that black women's sexual behavior threatened to "tumble gutterward," menacing the "headway which the Negro had made toward the state of good citizenship" (27). Carby concludes that "Hunter secures her personal autonomy in the process of claiming the right to circumscribe the rights of young black working-class women and to transform their behavior on the grounds of nurturing the progress of the race as a whole" (29).



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# 12 Representing Culture and Identity: African Women Writers and National Cultures

*Nana Wilson-Tagoe*

## Dominant Narratives of Nation and Culture

The problem with the notion of culture in African literature is that it is often embedded in representational narratives of the nation and shaped by the politics of national emergence. In such narratives, "culture" becomes part of a political process of constructing the distinctive identity of a national collective through the representation of its history and the creation of new knowledge about its place in world history. When culture is so determined by the exigencies of anticolonial discourse, linking nation and culture runs the risk of presenting culture as coherent and homogenous instead of continually contested and renewed.

As prominent twentieth-century commentators on African culture, both Frantz Fanon (1961/1967, 166–199) and Amilcar Cabral (1980, 138–154) recognize this risk when they reject tendencies to define culture in terms of concrete behavior patterns and customs and focus instead on people's fluid movements throughout the course of their political and economic history. Fanon also anticipates the paradoxes we confront in representing culture in literature. On the one hand, he sees culture as "the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence" (1967, 188). On the other hand, he recognizes that this "body of efforts" can never be stable and fixed, that it is from the "instability of cultural signification that the national culture comes to be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities—modern, colonial, postcolonial, native" (Bhabha 1994, 152). Fanon's warning against the reification of culture stems from his sense of culture's contemporariness and its continually transforming and contested aspects.

In spite of their sense of culture's fluidity and presentness, neither Cabral nor Fanon pursues the ramifications of cultural fluidity in relation to gender. For Fanon, the major power struggle in colonial relations is between colonizer and colonized and between black and white. Women's liberation and agency become part of the radical and revolutionary history of the anticolonial struggle and